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Black Protest Music: Sonic Representation of the Black American Experience

"Our music is our key to survival." states Ron Welburn[1], emphasizing the personal, cultural, and political power of Black music and its great importance within its demographic. Black music is often identified as having protest deeply rooted in its nature, as it is an acutely intimate expression of Black American identity and experience. From slavery to the second millennium, Black Americans have used music to combat the perpetual oppression and injustices they face in this country. Through three periods of Black struggle, it is shown that with the evolution of racial maltreatment comes the evolution of Black identity and Black dissent, and furthermore, the evolution of Black music.

Over the three centuries of Black music in America, artists have capitalized on the intrinsically combative nature of the genre and used music as their tool to inspire social movements by providing commentary and representation of Black life within manifestoes of rhythms and lyrics. Each period of Black struggle—slavery, the Civil Rights movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement—is represented by its own soundtrack, in which the songs intimately reflect the aims, themes, and styles of their respective campaign. The message and underlying spirit of the lyrics, however, have remained unchanged over 300+ years; this invariable mission is facilitated by the genre's elemental traits. The foundational properties of

[1] Floyd, Samuel A. *The Power of Black Music*. Page 145: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Black protest music can be designated into three traits, its use of call and response that fortifies transactional consumption, its ability to motivate and maintain physical movement, and its use as a commentary of Black experience and emotion through compelling lyrical choices. Over the three centuries of this genre's existence, its styles and techniques are perpetually changing, but through it all, the aforementioned foundational elements of the genre are unwavering.

The genre of Black protest music is defined by is unique and powerful combination of traits. The first of the foundational characteristics of the genre is the application of call and response, a technique that can be defined as a democratic exchange between vocalists, instruments, and their audience during a performance. First seen in the work songs and spirituals sung by Slaves, the technique is a means of communication that develops unity within the demographic. The call and response technique is used in Blues, Jazz, Hip-Hop, R&B, and Rap and although it's applied in different ways, it consistently endorses a transactional consumption cycle. Transactional consumption is defined as a cycle that intimately connects production and consumption; fortifying a codependent relationship between artists and their consumers that strengthens their bond. This interconnection leads to the production of music that represents the emotions of an artist's community of discourse. The second element of the genre is its ability to motivate and sustain physical action. This characteristic was also founded in the music of enslaved peoples and serves the purpose of coordinating efforts as well as sustaining energy during grueling movement or work. From relieving the fatigue of Slaves, to sustaining the long march from Selma to Montgomery, and through the streets of New York City and St. Louis, the call to physical action that Black music makes has proven to be an enduring tool in Black resistance. Black music is central to resistance movements as it expresses the tangible soul of Black struggle. Archimède explains, "At every stage of their integration on American soil, Black

people have created music that reflected their social integration as well as their state of mind." [2] The third foundational trait is found in the lyrics of Black music, as artists become a mouthpiece for their demographic through the use of powerful imagery and diction. Lyrics from every century convey similar rhetoric, an expression of the Black condition that's used as a call for social change regarding systemic racial maltreatment. This fierce plea relates to the other two foundational traits of the genre, as over the span of 300+ years, music has proven to be a useful tool for Black Americans to combat the perpetual repression and injustice they face.

Manifested in plantation fields, Black music began as slaves sang about their plight through work songs and spirituals. African Americans bound to slavery forged new styles and uses for music that established profound connections within their demographic. Slaves used music as a means of resisting their imprisonment by making poignant and interactive songs that coordinated their work and commented on their plight. Displaying the second aforementioned trait, work songs and spirituals were used to organize work and help Slaves endure exhausting labor. According to the Library of Congress, Slaves used song to both coordinate their labor, which increased the efficiency of the work; and to entertain, which lifted the spirits of the workers, if even temporarily. [3] Beyond the corporal interaction, this music was interactive in a different way, namely call and response. This technique developed a community identity and represented an outlet for their shared distress, as explained in Call and Response a Brief History, "The only power slaves have is, their bodies and their voices, that's all they had, so they held

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[2] "Black Music History: from Plantations to the White House." *NOFI*, 14 Feb. 2017, nofi.fr/2017/02/history-of-black-music-from-plantation-to-the-white-house/35687.

[3] "Traditional Work Songs." Government. Library of Congress. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/traditional-and-ethnic/traditional-work-songs/.

hands and raised their voices in antiphonal form; call and response." [4] Utilizing the call and response technique emboldened the lyrics by including and representing multiple individuals within the collective community. Through lyrics such as "let me go home/ I'm so tired," [5] "I can't let this dark cloud catch me," [6] and "And I'll be so glad when the sun goes down/ I wanna lie down," [7] Black Americans professed themes of existential fatigue. This lyrical tone of collective desperation- a desperation to escape their lived oppression, is essential to the genre. The work songs and spirituals constructed by slaves defined and expressed the emotions of their population and established a musical identity of dissent and rebellion that would continue on for hundreds of years.

Following the abolition of slavery, spirituals evolved into the Blues, a massively important musical style that combined ragtime, gospel, and folk tunes.[8] Cultivated from the weariness and desperation of works songs and spirituals, the Blues capitalizes on dark, alling themes. This style was the next phase of the extensive evolution of protest music and another acute implementation of the genre's foundational characteristics. The Blues is defined by its use of call and response vocals as well flattened notes within the specific range of the scale coined

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[4] "Call and Response a Brief History." TED-Ed. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://ed.ted.com/on/h29ETvyw.

[5] "Sam Amidon – Johanna The Row-Di Lyrics." Accessed December 12, 2017. https://genius.com/Sam-amidon-johanna-the-row-di-lyrics.

[6] Quittin' Time Song - Samuel Brooks. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xLpZ9BDoOo.

[7] I Be So Glad... When The Sun Goes Down. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=C-zlSq4mWiE.

[8] "The Origins of Blues Music." Paragraph 2. All About Blues Music. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.allaboutbluesmusic.com/the-origins-of-blues-music/.

the Blues Scale.[9] The Blues scale consists of 6 different notes, 5 of the minor pentatonic scale, as well as the diminished 5th. [10] The midrange notes assisted in the "soulful, wailing expression of pain, heartbreak and yearning" of Blues.[11] Beyond the Blues Scale and other unique characteristics of the new genre, at its foundation remained the three elemental aspects of slave music. The call and response technique stayed integral to Black music over the years and became one of the most prominent aspects of the Blues. Call and response in Blues can be understood as a communication between two or more instruments, between a performer and their own instrument, between two or more band members, and, above all, between a performer and their audience.[12] According to Samuel A Floyd, this practice created a bond between instruments, performers, and the audience, and formed a "communal and cooperative" musical atmosphere.[13] True to the genre, Blues developed public understanding and expressed shared dissent, enhancing the spirit of group rebellion through lyrics. According to Mary Ellison, Blues artists mixed subtle and humorous innuendo with blatant criticism to create protest songs that represented Black struggle and encouraged Black empowerment.[14] As Kyle Roberts explains, the Blues "invited Black people to embrace the reality and truth of Black experience." [15] This style reflected the emotions of multiple generations of Black Americans and their experiences in

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[9] "The Origins of Blues Music." Paragraph 2. All About Blues Music. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.allaboutbluesmusic.com/the-origins-of-blues-music/.

[10] Furstner, Michael. "JAZCLASS - Blues Scale Lesson , Blues Scale in All Keys." Jazclass, 2011. http://www.jazclass.aust.com/scales/scablu.htm.

[11] Ethan. "Blues Basics." The Ethan Hein Blog (blog), January 8, 2011. http://www.ethanhein.com/wp/2011/blues-basics/.

[12] Isaacs, Dave. "Use Call and Response Like a Blues Legend." Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.jamplay.com/weekend-warrior/w/call-and-response-like-a-blues-legend.

[13] Floyd, Samuel A. The Power of Black Music. Page 228: Oxford University Press, 1995.

[14] Ellison, Mary. Lyrical Protest. Praeger, 1989.

[15] Roberts, Kyle. "The Blues as 'Secular Spirituals': James Cone on B.B. King." Unsystematic Theology (blog), May 15, 2015. http://www.patheos.com/blogs/unsystematictheology/2015/05/the-blues-as-secular-spirituals-james-cone-on-b-b-king/.

slavery, abolition, and reconstruction. Community sentiments of dehumanization and its consequent rebellion can be found in lyrics from Lead Belly "They want to feed me cornbread and molasses/ But I got my pride/ If he asks you was I runnin'/ Tell him I was flyin," [16] and Sam Cooke "It's been a long time coming/ But I know a change is gonna come."[17] These ideas of pride, identity, and a longing for freedom stick with the genre as it progresses through the 20th century. As the voices of Black discontent grew louder, and as the blues swelled into the creation of Jazz, the themes of resilience and optimism were championed. Let Freedom Swing summarizes the power of Jazz, explaining "At its very core, this music affirms our belief in community, in love, and in the dignity of human life."[18] With Blues at its back, Jazz emerged and the two became a driving force in the country's civil rights reckoning.

The line between Jazz and Blues can get easily blurred, as they share core similarities, but Jazz can be distinguished by its swing notes and improvisations. Unlike Blues, Jazz is performed with an ensemble where all members hold equal importance; this creates a democratic relationship that is utilized to build off of one another. The bond between bandmates is manifested into improvisations, which are crucial to the integrity of the Jazz style. Improvisations are a nuanced and complex practice of the call and response relationship that emerged in slavery and was played out by the Blues. Improvisations allowed individual artists create and express on the spot, communicating within ensemble. Call and response in Blues and Jazz had far reaching implications during the Civil Rights Movement as it continued its tradition

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[16] "Leadbelly – Take This Hammer Lyrics." Accessed December 12, 2017. https://genius.com/Leadbelly-take-this-hammer-lyrics.

[17] "Sam Cooke- A Change Is Gonna Come Lyrics." Genius. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://genius.com/1300910/Sam-cooke-a-change-is-gonna-come/Its-been-a-long-time-coming-but-i-know-a-change-is-gonna-come-oh-yes-it-will.

[18] "Let Freedom Swing, Jazz And Democracy ." *Jazz Academy*, academy.jazz.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/14-15-Let-Freedom-Swing-Concert-Resource-Guide.pdf.

of inspiring cooperation and creating unity. The presence of a growing resistance movement in the 50's empowered Black musicians to embrace their positions as social agents and encourage social movement through melodies and lyrics. Artists energized the campaign, inspiring and strengthening the discourse community through movement and emotion. Blues and Jazz were the spine of the civil rights movement; developed from southern grassroots, their respective lyrical styles were an embodiment of the Black American experience and helped drive the movement. Music was used in the late 50's and early 60's because of its unique ability to spread rhetoric, inspire, engage, and motivate action; even being recognized by Martin Luther King Jr as "the soul of the movement."[19]

The nature of this gigantic movement allowed the three foundational characteristics of the genre to play out on a larger scale and thus have further reaching implications. Considering the idea of music inspiring and supporting physical movement, nowhere is this clearer than in the use of music as the pulse to a march. The singing and chanting propelled protesters into every step, helping maintain the group's unity and energy. Hundreds of protesters chanted "Freedom Now" and sang "We shall overcome" as they used their bodies and voices to break through their suppression and finally be seen.[20] Marching and chanting represents the call and response relationship as there is usually a few leaders who will call and be answered in unison by the hundreds of demonstrators. Furthermore, protest itself acts as a response to a social call made by unfair and/or unjust occurrences or circumstances. The chants themselves, as well as the manner of communication, are profound and command attention from both bystanders and the country.

[19] "The Role of Music in the Civil Rights Movement." | Kent State Online Master of Music in Music Education. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://musicedmasters.kent.edu/the-role-of-music-in-the-civil-rights-movement/.

[20] "Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966 | Smithsonian Folkways." Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://folkways.si.edu/voices-of-the-civil-rights-movement-black-american-freedom-songs-1960-1966/african-american-music-documentary-struggle-protest/album/smithsonian.

The music and lyrics of the utilized protest songs are compelling because of their rare balance of personal and public intimacy. The constant song and expression was used to build "psychological strength against harassment and brutality," [21] creating an identity and understanding through lyrics that both, spoke directly of situations that affected Black Americans daily lives, as well as commented on the systemic racism that Black Americans spent a lifetime predisposed to. In the words of Brian Ward, "Few sights or sounds conjure up the passion and purposefulness of the Southern Civil Rights Movement as powerfully as freedom songs." [22] One of the most important freedom songs was "We Shall Overcome." A song that is understood to have come from a hymn called *I'll Overcome Someday* and that portrays a hopeful and resilient mood as well as imagery of a harmonious world. This song has been adapted by many artists, but Bernice Johnson Reagon's 1962 version redefined the song, adding spontaneous vocal punctuations, call and response vocal patterns, and improvisational possibilities derived from the Black gospel-music tradition. [23] *We Shall Overcome* played a truly integral role in the civil rights movement as it displayed the genre's foundational aspects. Its influence and popularity was due to the fact that it exists as an expression of the temporal Black experience and it's entailed emotion. Black protest music's ability to engage and inspire is a timeless trait that has endured throughout many decades and its power is made possible by the elemental nature of the genre.

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[21] "Music in the Civil Rights Movement." Government. Library of Congress. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/music-in-the-civil-rights-movement/.

[22] Ward, Brian. "'People Get Ready': Music and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s." History Now: American History Online. Accessed December 12, 2017. http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Southern-Music&month=0812&week=b&msg=IOiEuni4iF4jF6VrZjrLMg&user=&pw=votariesofapollo/votariesofapollo.cgi?list=H-SC.

[23] Ward, Brian. "'People Get Ready': Music and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s." History Now: American History Online. Accessed December 12, 2017. http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Southern-Music&month=0812&week=b&msg=IOiEuni4iF4jF6VrZjrLMg&user=&pw=votariesofapollo/votariesofapollo.cgi?list=H-SC.

As the decades pass, musicians actively use call and response and intimate lyrics as tools to persuade physical movement and further embolden their discourse community.

As the millennium came to an end, the pain of Blues and Jazz boiled over into the creation of R&B, Hip Hop, and Rap; preserving the message of preceding generations of Black Americans. These three styles are employed by modern Black artists and while they have distinct differences, they'll be analyzed together because all three emerged in the late 20th century and modern artists often employ techniques from each style in their music. These styles brought brand new life into the genre, introducing the use of hard, loud, and driving rhythms, powerful imagery of contemporary Black reality through explicit lyrics, and other notable traits. This conglomerate of modern styles utilizes the foundational aspects of the genre in a familiar way, attesting to the fact that the underlying message professed by Black artists has remained relevant over 300+ years.

Call and response is employed by artists of the last four decades in a similar way it was used in the styles that preceded it. Songs like Trouble Funk's 1982 song "Drop the Bomb" and Usher's 2008 hit "Love in This Club," utilize vocal call and response between the performer and the audience but as explained by Nathan Keegan, the technique evolved with the new styles, "call-and-response [is] a multi-leveled conversation that at once includes artist, posse, producer, and audience."[24] This multi-level conversational nature of this technique is ever present but now entails the inclusion of positions and people that are unique to the styles, the posse and producer. The second modern application of the call and response technique is identical to its application during the Civil Rights Movement, as a method of communication between organizers and their crowd during protest marches.

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[24] Keegan, Nathan. "Language and Identity in Hip-Hop's Call-and-Response." *Boston College*, Boston College , www.udc.gal/grupos/ln/ICCM/ICCM-eng/files/NKeeghan_Abst.pdf.

Responding to a call of social unrest regarding police brutality, organizers and protesters utilized similar methods as the generations before them, focusing on themes of communal identity and hope. Most famously using Kendrick Lamar's 2015 song "Alright," protesters across the country declared the lyrics "We gon' be alright" as a proclamation of resilience, Emmanuel C.M. explains that "instead of sadness and doubt when faced with oppression, Kendrick proclaims hope and comfort." [25] Combining with the theme of inspiring physical movement, songs like Lamar's "Alright," Daye Jack and Killer Mike's "Hands Up," and Beyonce's "Formation" were used as protest chants as well sung during marches or other demonstrations to keep spirits high, help maintain energy levels, as well as to let their message be heard by the country at large. Protesters would sing Beyonce's "I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros/ I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils/ Earned all this money, but they never take the country out me" [26] and Daye Jack's "Living with my head down/ Hands up/ No no don't shoot don't shoot," [27] as proclamations of pride and pain. Most of these demonstrations were held by or in connection with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, a group primarily led by Black women with the mission of gaining justice and equality for all Black Americans and Black people around the world. Sprouting after the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin and growing with the over 1,190 deaths of unarmed Black Americans at the hands of the police between 2013-2016,[28] the BLM movement swept the nation. Much like how they've been used

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[25] C.M., Emmanuel. "Three Times Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright' Has Been Used By Protesters." XXL Mag, March 15, 2016. http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2016/03/kendrick-lamar-alright/.

[26] "Beyoncé – Formation Lyrics." Genius. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://genius.com/Beyonce-formation-lyrics.

[27] "Daye Jack- Hands Up Lyrics." Genius. Accessed December 12, 2017. https://genius.com/8114548/Daye-jack-hands-up/Living-with-my-head-down-hands-up-no-no-dont-shoot-dont-shoot-no-no-dont-shoot-living-with-my-head-down-hands-up-no-no-dont-shoot-dont-shoot-no-no-dont-shoot.

[28] "National Trends." *Mapping Police Violence*, mappingpoliceviolence.org/nationaltrends/.

in the past, these call and response protest songs represent an outlet for the range of profound emotions experienced by modern day Black Americans. Similar to the Civil Rights Movement, BLM used the voices of Black artists to spread their mission and motivate action; pressuring the community and the country to recognize that racial oppression is still prevalent.

These modern styles are the embodiment of the pain that follows three centuries of injustice, maltreatment, and oppression. Although social progress has been made, methods of discrimination against Black Americans have transformed over the years and inequality has become more discreet as racism became a systemic element of the American legal system. Black music has taken aim at this injustice by making anti police brutality rhetoric a main theme in music the same way it exists as a main theme in modern Black existance. From the 1989 NWA song "Fuck the Police," to the 2004 Jay Z song "99 problems", and furthermore to the 2015 song "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar, the anguish and resentment of the unfair and systematic targeting of Black Americans is expressed in R&B, Hip-Hop, and Rap, three uncut and harsh styles that parallel their experienced emotions. In 2015 William C Anderson explained that "Black music has always been gradually becoming more and more blunt, the bold lyrics of acts like Sly and the Family Stone's 1969 song 'Don't Call Me Ni***r, Whitey', and the Last Poets' 1970 song 'Wake Up, Ni***rs', influenced the generation that would influence [ours]." [29] The lyrics of modern artists like Lamar and Beyonce capture Black existence and fortify Black pride through their explicit lyrical choices. Anderson analyzes that the brash lyrics are "a reflection of what [Black Americans] are accustomed to. This is the inherited defiance of Black power infused with

[29] Anderson, William, C. "Sounds of Black Protest Then and Now." Paragraph 10, Pitchfork, September 16, 2015. https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/898-sounds-of-black-protest-then-and-now/.

a lack of concern about respectability politics."[30] These new styles, however, did not introduce a thematic pushing of social boundaries; as challenging norms is embedded into the nature of Black music. Daphne A Brooks describes the impact of Black music, stating that it "should sting and burn, be hard to digest for some, leave an aftertaste for others, make us feel more rather than less – whether it's hate or love – make us recognize our conflicted passions, and the contradictions of our strange, post-civil rights and post-Black power movement lives."[31] Anderson corroborates the notion that these 21st century musical expressions of the Black condition bear within them the history of the genre, as after he watched Janelle Monae perform he stated, "I could hear the civil rights era, I could hear the blues, and I could hear gospel." [32] This genre represents the poignant history of Black Americans and through every century its foundations grow stronger. Although styles are perpetually changing, and artists are employing the foundational traits of the genre in different ways, the integrity of these traits grows stronger with every decade of Black American existence.

Black music exists as a timeless and profound expression of Black existence. This spirit of struggle, resistance, and pride was manifested on plantations in the form of work songs and spirituals. Over the following centuries, Black music broadened, and with every generation Black Americans provided contemporary existential commentaries through the invention of new musical styles. Black musicians pioneered new styles to navigate the perpetual oppression and injustice they've faced for over 300 years. The ever evolving style of the genre is anchored by

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[30] Anderson, William, C. "Sounds of Black Protest Then and Now." Paragraph 12, Pitchfork, September 16, 2015. https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/898-sounds-of-black-protest-then-and-now/.

[31] Brooks, Daphne A. "How #BlackLivesMatter Started a Musical Revolution." *The Observer*, Guardian News and Media, 13 Mar. 2016, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/13/black-lives-matter-beyonce-kendrick-lamar-protest.

[32] Anderson, William, C. "Sounds of Black Protest Then and Now." Paragraph 15, Pitchfork, September 16, 2015. https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/898-sounds-of-black-protest-then-and-now/.

three evergreen characteristics, testaments to how the pain felt in every decade is a derivative of the pain felt during the precedent 200+ years of slavery. Through the aforementioned lyrics from the past three centuries it's discernable that the following properties, themes of existential fatigue, consolidation of community, and representation of the resiliency of Black identity and Black pride are ever present in the genre. Examining their lyrics and music, it's clear that over the span of their existence in America, Black Americans have been pleading with the country for the same rights and justices. It's time the country listens, internalizes, and reckons with the messages of Black Music. Addressing the professed emotions, resentments, and hopes that are embedded in Black expression will cause a nationwide social reckoning. The acknowledgment of centuries of abiding pain and anger will allow space for the gradual rebuilding towards a fair, just, and safe existence for Black Americans.